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MURDER AT CROOKED HOUSE – THE ONE ACT MUSICAL



at Crooked House: The one act musical

A one act comedy mystery

book by Tim Kelly

music and lyrics by Bill Francoeur



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TIM KELLY, playwright, has won innumerable writing awards including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. His work covers a wide range — everything from musicals to mystery thrillers. His plays have been produced off-Broadway and at regional theatres, winning considerable acclaim from both press and public. He particularly likes to write plays for youthful audiences that are imaginative and spirited: **Lucky, Lucky Hudson** and **Is There a Doctor in the House?** being prime examples. *Dramatist Guild Magazine* calls him “One of the most successful and most produced playwrights operating outside the New York area.” His complete writings are with the Special Collections Library at the University of Wyoming.

He is, very likely, the most-published playwright in America.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

(For a flexible cast of eighteen: 9 female, 6 male; or
8 female, 7 male. Plus 3 characters who can be either.)

BUM* — An intruder

REBECCA FITZWILLIAM — Landlady of “Crooked House”

JEEVES — Old butler, totally confused

SHIRLEY — Teenage maid

FAY STRANGE — A strange young actress

ANGUISH CRISPIE — Writes mystery plays

MARK PALEGRAVE — Eccentric young man, interested in
orchids and bugs

PENNY RUSSELL — Distraught young bride

DELIVERY PERSON** — Anyone for pizza?

HERCULES PORRIDGE — The famous Hoboken detective —
well, almost

LEON RUSSELL* — Corpse

BRIDGET MORIARTY — Doomed visitor

DETECTIVE BOBBY — City police

POLICEWOMAN MULLIGAN — Bobby’s partner

COLONEL CHUTNEY — Bizarre neighbor

STUDENT #1 — Aspiring gumshoe

STUDENT #2 — Another

STUDENT #3 — Another

NURSE PAYNE — Not what the doctor ordered

*Role of BUM and LEON RUSSELL are played by the same actor.

**Can be played Female or Male.

PRODUCTION NOTES

SYNOPSIS

The action of the play takes place in “Crooked House,” an old mansion converted into a boarding hotel. The time is the present.

Scene 1 — A dark and stormy night.

Scene 2 — The following morning.

Scene 3 — That night. It’s dark and stormy again.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This show offers everyone involved a rare opportunity to produce a Broadway-type show in terms of variety, energy, and pizzazz. It’s not only a suspenseful whodunit, but it’s a comedy show with bizarre characters and preposterous situations. The music is built into the flow of the show. This is why everyone in the production will be challenged to keep it moving on the beat. Unlike many musicals where the dialogue and music are quite separate, in this production they are often married together. Background music cues are indicated in the playscript where the actors will speak and sing over the instrumental mood music. It may take many rehearsals to get the timing right, but the result will be well worth the effort.

When you cast the characters, consider comedy contrasts: silly voice, character voice, parody voice. Be aware this is a spoof of 30s and 40s private-eye shows, and the actors should create characterizations to fit that style. Most characterizations will be stereotypes — that’s all part of the fun. Every performer should exaggerate his or her character and their mannerisms. This applies to the spoken word as well as the singing. Let the audience feel they are part of the fun — they’re laughing at the spoof as much as the actors are inside their characters. The characters should all be exaggerated. Don’t try for subtlety. The dialogue should be spoken in a loud, direct fashion.

PROPS

ON STAGE: Fireplace, vase. Ottoman or low bench. Floor lamp with large shade. Large potted fern or bush. Desk with chair, telephone. French doors with practical drapes or curtains (optional). Sofa, table with vase of flowers or ferns. Wastebasket, handsome chairs (2) with table. Additional stage dressing, as desired: rugs, more lamps, pictures, etc. Remember — everything at “Crooked House” is rather shabby.

BROUGHT ON, Scene 1:

BUM — long loaf of bread, bottle of soda pop

REBECCA — lorgnette or monocle on chain

SHIRLEY — flowers or ferns

FAY — raincoat and hat, umbrella, hat with black veil, envelope with dollar bills, cigarette holder
MARK — orchid, magnifying glass, flashlight
PENNY — book
DELIVERY PERSON — pizza box
HERCULES — manila file folder, wastebasket
CORPSE — eyeglasses

BROUGHT ON, Scene 2: Wastebasket positioned prior to curtain

HERCULES — pad and pencil, wristwatch
MARK — magnifying glass, jar
DETECTIVE BOBBY — I.D., wallet, whistle
POLICEWOMAN MULLIGAN — revolver
COLONEL CHUTNEY — rifle, knapsack with rubber chicken
PENNY — handkerchief
ANGUISH — cup and saucer
DELIVERY PERSON — large candy box wrapped with colorful ribbon

BROUGHT ON, Scene 3:

SHIRLEY — vase with flower/fern arrangement
FAY — knitting bag with needles and 4' length of yarn
PENNY — book
MARK — magnifying glass
LEON — handcuffs
NURSE PAYNE — revolver
DELIVERY PERSON — pizza box containing revolver
DETECTIVE BOBBY — bandage, sling, crutch

SOUND

Rain, slamming door, doorbell, telephone, gunfire (optional: supposedly from Colonel Chutney's rifle)

COSTUMES

Modern. Any special description is mentioned in text as character makes his or her appearance.

MISCELLANEOUS

Even though Bum and Leon Russell are played by the same actor, list two names in the program. Let the role of the Bum be played by a fictional George Spelvin. Use the actor's real name for Leon (corpse).

If the director wishes, the role of Detective Bobby can be played as a female character.

Remember — there must be no dead spots, no pauses, no waits. Something is always happening on stage. As soon as one character exits, another character is making an entrance. Work on a brisk flow of action.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

(In order of appearance. Listed with the cue number for recorded music and sound effects and the playbook page numbers.)

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. "Murder at Crooked House" (Prologue) (Ensemble) | 1 |
| 2. "A Dilapidated Mess" (Rebecca, Jeeves) | 3 |
| 3. "Hoboken Private Eye" (Underscore) | 10 |
| 4. "Hoboken Private Eye" (Hercules, Penny) | 11 |
| 5. Sound Effect — Thunder/Rain | 14 |
| 6. "Whodunnit?" (Hercules, Guests) | 16 |
| 7. "Bridget Moriarty's Demise" (Instrumental) | 27 |
| 8. "Whodunnit?" (Reprise) (Ensemble) | 29 |
| 9. Sound Effect — Thunder/Rain | 35 |
| 10. "Hoboken Private Eye" (Reprise) (Hercules, Guests) | 38 |
| 11. "The Game's Up" (Instrumental) | 43 |
| 12. "Murder at Crooked House" (Epilogue) (Ensemble) | 44 |
| 13. Sound Effect — Extra Rain | 44 |
| 14. Sound Effect — Extra Thunder | 44 |

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ACT I
Scene 1

SETTING: “Crooked House,” a Victorian monstrosity. We see the main room. Down Right leads into the dining room. Right is a fireplace. Vase on mantel. An ottoman or low upholstered bench is placed in front of fireplace. Up Right there is an entrance into the library. Up Center leads into the entry hallway. Off-stage Right from this hallway goes to the front door. Off-stage Left leads to the upstairs. (If possible, we should see some stairs.) On one side of entry hallway is a standing floor lamp with a large shade. Down Left leads into a solarium — a room for growing tropical plants, ferns, and orchids. This entryway is practically obscured by a large potted fern or bush. Left is a desk and chair. Telephone on the desk. Up Left are French doors that lead onto the grounds. There are practical curtains or drapes that can be drawn across. A sofa is Stage Right Center. Behind the sofa is a table with a vase of flowers or a “fern arrangement.” Wastebasket right of sofa. Stage Left Center are two handsome chairs with a small table between them.

The preceding describes only the basic stage properties required for blocking the play. To these basic items should be added “dressing.” That is — rugs, lamps, pictures, etc. Whatever enhances the stage picture. Everything looks as if it’s been in the shabby house forever — elegance gone, faded, and threadbare. The perfect setting for, say, a mystery by Agatha Christie.

Note: Set will work easily with only stage drapes.

1. Murder at Crooked House (Prologue)

(Played in front of curtain. Houselights down, Music Cue #1, Prologue.

ENSEMBLE enters in darkness during the pipe organ interlude.)

ENSEMBLE: *(Sings.)* **Murder! Murder! Murder in the night!**

Best not stray too far from the light.

Mischief! Mischief! Who will misbehave?

One wrong step could send you to the grave!

Murder! Murder! What are we to do?

Who will be next? Is it you or you?

Mischief! Mischief! Everyone’s a mark.

Best not wander after dark.

Scheming, plotting, sneaking all about.

Lurking in the shadows, waiting to come out!

Cunning as a leopard, quiet as a mouse.

Sometime in the night there’ll be a murder at Crooked House!

1
2 **Murder! Murder! Everyone is cursed!**
3 **One more soul to quench its thirst.**
4 **Mischief! Mischief! Who is on its plate?**
5 **One wrong move could seal your fate!**
6
7 **Murder! Murder! Who will be the next?**
8 **Legend says this house is hexed.**
9 **Mischief! Mischief! Hiding in our midst!**
10 **Who will turn up on its list?**
11
12 **Creeping, crawling when you are asleep.**
13 **Roaming in the halls, it never makes a peep.**
14 **Villainous rascal, violent louse;**
15 **Sometime in the night there'll be a murder at Crooked House!**
16 *(Music under, ENSEMBLE exits left and right.)*
17
18 *PRIOR TO CURTAIN: We hear the sound of heavy rain.*
19 *AT RISE: Curtains open slowly to reveal the room. Sound of rain up. The*
20 *stage lighting flickers, dims, giving a shadowy look to establish a*
21 *“mysterious” mood. BUM sneaks in from Down Right. He looks about*
22 *warily. He doesn’t wish to be seen. He wears a ragged topcoat. From*
23 *one pocket protrudes a long loaf of French bread. He carries a bottle of*
24 *soda pop. His face is hidden by a large floppy hat and dark sunglasses.*
25 *He wears gloves with no fingers and overshoes that are plainly too*
26 *large for his feet. Instead of trousers, he wears pajama bottoms. The*
27 *French doors stand open. He crosses behind sofa and pauses to take a*
28 *long thirsty swallow of soda pop. Sound of rain fades.*
29 **REBECCA: (Off-stage from hallway, left) Do the best you can, Jeeves.**
30 **JEEVES: (Off-stage from hallway, left) You know I will, Madam.**
31 **REBECCA: (Off-stage) You’re a comfort. (BUM practically gags on the**
32 *soda pop when he hears the voices. Shoots a furtive look Upstage and*
33 *escapes out onto the grounds via the French doors. REBECCA*
34 *FITZWILLIAM, the landlady of “Crooked House,” enters Up Center.*
35 *She wears an out-of-style dress that practically touches the floor.*
36 *Around her neck is looped a lengthy strand of pearls. To complement*
37 *her dated persona she uses a lorgnette or monocle, which is also draped*
38 *around her neck. JEEVES, the aged butler, follows in. He wears either*
39 *formal attire (swallowtail coat), or dark trousers with a white steward’s*
40 *jacket. He’s very proper, very stuffy. Complete senility is near. The two*
41 *look as if they were characters from a mystery or detective film from the*
42 *1930s.)*
43 **REBECCA: (Notices the dim lights.) Oh, dear. The lights again.**
44 **Whenever there’s a storm or a hurricane they flicker and fade.**
45 **JEEVES: I’ll call the electrician in the morning.**

1 REBECCA: Won't do much good. Everything here in "Crooked
2 House" is so old and worn. Even the wiring. Not to mention
3 the plumbing. (*Music segues into Music Cue #2, "A Dilapidated*
4 *Mess."*)

6 2. A Dilapidated Mess

7
8 REBECCA: (*Sings.*) It's dark! It's cold!
9 It's musty and it reeks!

10 JEEVES: It's dusty and it leaks!

11 REBECCA: It's monstrous and it's evil, so I'm told!

12
13 It cracks! It creaks!

14 It grumbles and it groans!

15 JEEVES: It mumbles and it moans!

16 REBECCA: It's overrun with mice and little squeaks!

17
18 The roof is slowly crumbling
19 and the chimney's falling down.

20 JEEVES: Perhaps a new solutio,
21 let's burn it to the ground!

22
23 REBECCA: This place is simply wretched.
24 Indeed, I do confess.

25 JEEVES: It's a blight upon the earth ...

26 REBECCA/JEEVES: ... a dilapidated mess!
27 (*Music under.*)

28
29 REBECCA: (*Notices the open French doors, speaks.*) Who left those doors
30 open?

31 JEEVES: (*Speaks.*) I'll attend to them, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. (*JEEVES*
32 *walks slowly to the French doors, as if he had all the time in the world.*
33 *REBECCA steps left of sofa.*)

34 REBECCA: Mr. Russell wasn't due until morning. It's inconsiderate
35 of new boarders to call up at the last moment and change
36 things about.

37 JEEVES: Yes, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. (*He closes the French doors. The stage*
38 *lighting returns to normal. REBECCA reacts.*)

39 REBECCA: That's better. I don't like it when the lights flicker and
40 dim. It gives me the creeps.

41 JEEVES: Shall I get you something, Mrs. Fitzwilliam?

42 REBECCA: For what?

43 JEEVES: Your creeps, Madam.

44 REBECCA: Don't be ridiculous.

45

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